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“Home Alone” at the Piazza: Privatized Public Space in Philadelphia

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The Piazza at Schmidt's is a 2009 Philadelphia mixed-use development of apartments, retail and 80,000 square feet of paved open space, meant to foster vibrant urban interaction. Initially, the Piazza was highly community-oriented: the developer incorporated the neighborhood's requests for walkability, filled the retail space with local artists, and hosted many public events. However, this early community-based success was unsustainable because of the developer's inherent private-sector commitment to maximizing the return on investment. Today, the Piazza is chronically underused because the drive for short-term profit has sabotaged the long-term viability of the public space. The Piazza at Schmidt's is a telling example of why the system of privatized public space may be ineffective: because the original arts community was less profitable, it was not given the chance to thrive, and the resulting public space has lost its sense of vibrant urban life.

Introduction:

In many ways, successful public spaces are the archetype of urban life: they allow users to feel safe, entertained and included as part of a vibrant community, even if just for a few minutes. When the development of public space falls under private jurisdiction, the goals for the space shift from public enjoyment to expansion of profit. The Piazza at Schmidt's, a 2009 mixed-use development in the gentrifying neighborhood of Northern Liberties, Philadelphia, exemplifies this phenomenon.

The project began in 2000 when Tower Investments, led by real estate mogul Bart Blatstein, purchased the former Schmidt's Brewery and cleared the site with the intention of building a suburban-type strip mall with surface parking and "big box" stores (Pristin, 2009). However, the widespread dissatisfaction with this idea led Blatstein to take community input in order to gain support, and the vision for the site transformed. In 2002, Blatstein commissioned a Northern Liberties architecture firm to design a walkable, transit-oriented community inspired by a Roman piazza, the archetype of vibrant public space. He then filled the development's commercial space with creative retailers from the neighborhood's artist population. When the Piazza opened in 2009, it was hailed as a success, a reward for the community's dedication to the contentious development process, and a hallmark of the "new" Blatstein, who had seen the light of careful urban design (Saffron, 2009).

Though the Piazza at Schmidt's was planned to be bustling with people and activity, today, over seven years later, the plaza is chronically underused, and leaves visitors feeling more like lone trespassers than participants in a vibrant community. Why is a sleek community space in one of Philadelphia's most popular neighborhoods almost always empty?

The answer lies in the inherent tension between maximizing profit and creating a sense of community. Blatstein prioritized quick return on investment over fulfillment of the more communal vision for the space. As the development and neighborhood became more established, Blatstein found integrating the original community too challenging and expensive. However, this view was shortsighted: more attention to the success of the public space in the first five years could have established a better long-term investment, in addition to a community asset.

Literature Review:

In the modern city, building vibrant public spaces – although possible through careful design – is very difficult. Some scholars argue that the lifestyle of modern urban dwellers inherently leads to a disinterest in public space (Mandanipour, 2010; Marcus, 1997; Chidister, 1998). People no longer go “to one open-air market to buy food, to a common pump for water, or to a central place to hear the town crier declare the news,” as they did in traditional piazzas (Marcus, 1997). This privatization of life has made central public space antiquated, and has

made “plaza use just an ‘event’ in the well-established private life of most of the users.” (Chidister, 1998). Others contend that civic engagement and social connectedness has lost its place in American values, causing a decline in social capital. This transformation of American life has caused a decrease in community activity, and people have become less likely to spend time in public spaces with strangers (Putnam, 1995).

In addition to the “privatization of life,” the shift to a more market-based, privatized economy has affected the viability of public spaces (Mandanipour, 2010). In postwar America, large-scale public sector (and often modernist) development was the main source of neighborhood investment. However, with the neo-liberal market shift in the 1980’s, the responsibilities of urban development were taken over by the private sector whose ultimate ambition is making a profit.

The privatization of public space follows from this increased reliance on private developers to provide public amenities. In the face of declining city budgets, corporate sponsors adopted formerly public parks, and private corporations began to replace financially strapped public agencies as the providers of plazas and squares. This first became notable in cities that allowed developers to exceed height restrictions in exchange for the construction of public space (Marcus, 1997). Many of these “corporate foyers” were originally unsuccessful because of their stark, unwelcoming design or location (Whyte, 1980).

However, there are examples of private spaces, such as Bryant Park in New York City, that are successful and used for organized or spontaneous activities, along with general socializing and observation (Low, 2000). Researchers argue that design is one of the main reasons for the success of some private spaces. Design that promotes sociability is key to a successful space: people must use the plaza, making it lively and allowing users to feel safe, entertained and included (Gehl, 1987; Jacobs, 1961; Whyte, 1980). Flexible seating allows visitors to arrange the space according to their wishes (Whyte, 1980). The more options given, the more likely a person will be comfortable within the plaza and will stay longer, activating the space and helping to attract others. Additional studies have isolated the need for a diversity of uses (Jacobs, 1961), along with natural features and elements of “triangulation,” like sculptures or performers, to inspire conversation between strangers (Whyte, 1980).

Although privately owned public spaces can benefit from these design additions, often the resulting spaces differ from publicly funded plazas. The developer’s goal is to use enjoyable urban space to generate private profit and retail expansion. Thus privately owned plazas are more symbolic and disconnected, as opposed to being embedded in the social fabric of the city (Mandanipour, 2010). Developers rely on America’s consumer culture to make their spaces successful (Zukin, 2010), subtly welcoming the “desired public only,” (Peterson, 2006) rather than focusing on organic community activity. As a

result, plaza owners often need to include retail in order to attract visitors. Unless the plaza becomes commercially successful, it will likely remain empty or underused, and will not generate revenue for the owner (Low, 2000).

Philadelphia's Piazza at Schmidt's illustrates the urban development and design trends that dominate the modern urban landscape. This study aims to serve as a window into the life of the private, commercialized modern plaza: to understand the way these trends manifest themselves in the experience of an urban space over time.

Methodology:

This study was conducted over a period of nine months, using a variety of data sources including interviews and systematic observation, as well as a comprehensive review of Piazza news and blog coverage and an analysis of neighborhood change in terms of census variables.

Past studies have proven careful and prolonged observation to be essential for understanding public spaces (Gehl, 1987; Presier & Harvey, 1987). Thus, this study prioritizes systematic observation, defined here as recording all activities occurring in the plaza for a period of two hours or longer. Documentation during this process included detailed field notes, photography and "snapshot" drawings of where people were located in the site. The resulting data included information on the number of people in the plaza, their activities and duration of stay, along with descriptions of their demeanor and dress. Systematic observation was

conducted at the Piazza 12 times over the course of ten weeks in varying conditions. This process produced quantitative data on number of visitors and length of visits, although a greater period of observation would make this data more comprehensive.

However, because the Piazza space is so often inactive, interviews became paramount to the data collection process. Informal interviews were conducted with a variety of people including residents, neighbors, workers and first time visitors. Ten formal interviews were conducted with people involved in the design, development, management and retail of the Piazza. These included interviews with the project architect, as well as the developer's initial retail "curator." These interviews also yielded original planning documents which show the intricacies of the design and leasing process from the architects' and developer's perspectives.

A full review of newspaper and blog articles on the Piazza clarified how the space was used and perceived in the past. This demonstrated the shifting opinions on the development, which would be difficult to pinpoint through interviews. This review also included an analysis of the changes in the Piazza marketing strategy over time, as well as the compilation of a timeline of events held in the space since 2009.

Finally, this study also included an investigation of the way that Northern Liberties has gentrified. Census variables such as home value, median income,

density and total population were compared from 2000 to 2015. These changes were mapped spatially with ArcGIS to understand the geographic extent of the changes surrounding the Piazza.

Data:

Though there was some doubt about Blatstein's motives, his willingness to take ideas from the community and to create a modern communal space earned him much respect at the time of the Piazza's opening. Community leaders like Larry Freedman, the zoning chairman for the Northern Liberties Neighborhood Association (NLNA), praised the development as a "remarkable success on multiple levels." (Pristin, 2009). Initial media coverage was equally glowing: Philadelphia Inquirer architecture critic Inga Saffron celebrated the designers' use of materials like poured concrete, glass and brown brick, which "speak to the surroundings" of formerly industrial Northern Liberties. She applauded Blatstein for including over 100,000 square feet of retail, remarking that he has succeeded in creating a public space that feels like an "authentic place." (Saffron, 2009). This was the beginning of a positive published narrative about the Piazza that has lasted for many years, despite the growing visibility of the Piazza's flaws.

The initial commercial tenants inspired much of the Piazza's early acclaim (and its later disappointment). The retail space was converted into an artists' community, largely because of the work of Amber Lynn Thompson, a Northern Liberties artist who was hired by Tower Investments to be the "retail curator" in

2008. By the time Thompson was hired, the Piazza was in the final stages of construction, but only four of the retail spaces were filled, and over 17,000 square feet of retail space remained unoccupied. With just six months until the Piazza's grand opening, Thompson worked on the Tower Investments payroll with a few other people to recruit 30 artistic retailers, to whom Blatstein offered affordable rents. These ranged from a tattoo parlor display gallery to a designer jeans store. Their compact exhibition spaces filled the vacant Piazza retail space within a few months.

This quick transition was possible for three reasons: Thompson's relationship to the arts community, the discounted rent, and the flexibility of the construction team to build each space out to the retailer's specifications (at no extra cost because construction was not yet completed).

Thompson recruited retailers to the space using her own network of friends and acquaintances. She hosted parties in early 2009 at the Piazza to sell the space to other artists. Thompson's ornate invitation to one event dubs the space the "Artist's Piazza," offering a "home for artists to thrive, grow and collaborate." [See figure 1]. She recalls how difficult it was to convince her friends to even attend: "People were very wary about Bart, he has a bad reputation. He's known for doing what he wants and not caring what anyone thinks. And my friends knew that." (A. Thompson, personal communication, Nov 5, 2015). However, a brand new facility with personalized spaces was very

appealing. Despite their initial concerns, many guests could not resist the prospect of an artist community right in their own neighborhood.

However, the discounted rent is what made the move feasible for most of the artists. According to original records from early 2009, retailers were paying an average of \$1.20 per square foot per month. The majority signed leases for less than \$700 per month, with the first two months (April and May 2009) free. This was a sizeable discount from comparable commercial spaces at the time (Retail leasing agent, personal communication, Oct 11, 2015). Affordability made it possible for creative business owners across Philadelphia to relocate to Northern Liberties within just a few months of hearing about the project.

Blatstein also had much to gain from offering discounted rents initially. First, Thompson's plan had the potential to make the Piazza "cool," and to create excitement about the space, both within the arts community and on a broader scale (A. Thompson, personal communication, Nov 5, 2015). The Blatstein of the past (developer of strip malls and windowless warehouses) would not have considered achieving such an image a priority. However, the "New Urbanist" Blatstein saw the value in Thompson's idea.

The plan also ensured some liveliness for the space in the beginning: the retail would be fully occupied, and retail owners would host events to attract visitors and customers. Full occupancy was especially valuable to Blatstein in 2009 because of the 2008 financial crisis that had left the real estate market

devastated. According to Piazza business owner Carrie Collins, “at the time Tower Investments was ready to open the Piazza, it was just after the market crashed and business was terrible, thus the tenants they were hoping to fill their spaces with just either didn’t exist anymore or didn’t have the money.” (C. Collins, personal communication, Mar 21, 2016).

In her view, the artist community was Blatstein’s only option if he wanted to get the development off the ground during this time. Arik Victor, a business owner in the Piazza, explained how Blatstein gave the impression originally that “he was just trying to cover his utilities. He gave the retailers a huge amount of freedom with the space in the very beginning, because he was just trying to get through the first one or two years, which are the hardest for any new business.” (A. Victor, personal communication, Oct 27, 2015).

Blatstein’s motives were a stark contrast from the intentions of the artist community at the time. For them, this was a dream come to life: a real arts community in a brand new building with events and publicity. Ultimately, it was enough for them to “bet on Blatstein.” (A. Thompson, personal communication, Nov 5, 2015). However, in hindsight, most interviewees agree that it is unlikely Blatstein’s goals for the space were as community-oriented as he claimed. Collins remarked:

“I doubt Bart truly cared about sustaining an artists’ community as much as they just desperately needed to fill the spaces and start generating some

money during the recession. So, [Blatstein] co-opted the artists' energy to try and make his development seem like a cultural destination. He is a businessman, deeply disconnected to the reality of the working people of Philadelphia.” (C. Collins, personal communication, Mar 21, 2016).

This is an important point: Collins recognizes now that Blatstein is above all a businessman, and his motives for the artists' community and public space were profit-driven. Though they may not have realized it in 2009, today Victor, Collins and Thompson all recognize Blatstein's foremost intentions for the artist community: to simply get the project started, so that he could later make a profit.

However, for the first year or so, the bet on Blatstein paid off. The Piazza's art community was successful and “generally fun for the retailers,” (A. Thompson, personal communication, Nov 5, 2015). Thompson opened her own gallery in the Piazza where she held release parties every month and entertained a loyal base of customers. Collins, who moved her store to the Piazza in 2009, explained the feel of the artist community in the beginning: “[Thompson] continued to work really hard promoting the Piazza as a place for artist events and such. I socialized with many folks there and I was friends with many of the artists and business owners before they moved there actually.” (C. Collins, personal communication, Mar 21, 2016). Thus, the original retail community felt authentic because the relationships between business owners were pre-existing – this Philadelphia creative community had just never shared a physical space before.

The initial success also stemmed from constant events programming. The Piazza's original advertisements to potential commercial tenants stated that the Piazza would "have a running program of free events every week, dedicated to providing public access to exemplary multicultural music, dance, film and art programs." (A. Thompson, original documentation, Nov 5, 2015). Originally, the Piazza seemed to live up to its promises. Thompson's partner Dave Wurtzel continued to work for Blatstein, coordinating daily programming of the courtyard space. Events included weekly flea markets, concerts and other stage performances like kids shows, art or dance productions and large-scale concerts hosted by radio stations. In original plans for the summer 2010 events schedule, Thompson and Wurtzel had many creative event ideas for the space including a Piazza Pet Expo, May Day Floral Celebration, a bridal expo, and a punk rock flea market (A. Thompson, original documentation, Nov 5, 2015).

Regardless of Blatstein's reasoning, the implementation of Thompson's artist community brought an interesting form of success to the Piazza in 2009. Although it was not extremely profitable, for the first year or so, the Piazza seemed to live up to its reputation as an authentic urban space. In many ways, this was because the Piazza was a grassroots product of the actual neighborhood around it: the development was the intersection of the work done by neighbors who protested Blatstein's original plan, the local architects' modern Piazza design, and the artistic community that took over the retail space.

However, the fundamentally divergent goals for the space undermined the future of the artist community almost as soon as it had come to life. The ideology of the so-called “new” Blatstein was inherently different from his commercial tenants and the place they were trying to create. Thompson cites Blatstein’s focus on making money as the source of almost every conflict in the early years.

For example, both groups agreed that programming the space with markets would be beneficial. Thompson and many of the retailers were hoping for a curated group of vendors that matched their curated aesthetic. However, Blatstein focused on creating markets with as many vendors as possible, with less attention to the quality of the vendors. As each vendor was paying a flat event fee and likely a tent rental fee, this was a more profitable avenue for him, but created much dissatisfaction for the tenants that found their storefronts blocked every weekend by “dollar store vendors.” (A. Thompson, personal communication, Nov 5, 2015).

By 2010, Tower Investments began to host large concerts at the Piazza that quickly became a point of contention for some residents and neighbors. The concerts attracted huge groups of people, often becoming drunk and disorderly, but also bringing much notoriety to the space (Vella, 2014). For many of the more specialized stores and galleries, the concerts were a time to close, because staying open only brought in disruptive and non-spending customers. Retailers signing onto the space had been told that the ‘Artists’ Piazza’ would have “free

programming throughout the week that will keep and maintain a steady flow of traffic in a space that holds 5,000 people,” (A. Thompson, original documentation, Dec 13, 2015). Though these concerts counted as programming, the resulting foot traffic was not profitable for the artistic retailers. As Thompson explained, masses of drunken people or dollar store shoppers were not interested in the specialized artist community they had formed. However, they were more profitable for Blatstein and for the bars and restaurants that he had recruited for the space.

Concurrent with the programming conflict were more serious disputes in which Blatstein worked to oust retailers for more profitable tenants. Collins was served papers to vacate her storefront less than one year after her two-year contract was signed. Because of the amicable rent negotiations with Thompson, many of the artists were unaware that the contract they signed permitted Tower Investments to look for, and replace them with, more profitable tenants at any time. As Collins described, “it turned out [Tower Investments] was shopping around the entire time and found someone who was willing to pay three times what I was paying in rent.” (C. Collins, personal communication, Mar 21, 2016). Collins was forced to fight Tower Investments for just 30 days to find a space to relocate her entire business.

This strategy by Tower Investments made it impossible for most of the original tenants to maintain their storefronts in the Piazza. However, there were

exceptions to this, and some of the original retailers lasted longer than others.

Arik Victor's Creep Records is one of the two creative retailers who were able to maintain their space. Victor stands by the Piazza for the monumental changes it has made in the neighborhood, and is confident that it will regain momentum and attract more retail and visitors in the near future. However, he also notes that about 80% of his customers are "outsiders," or people not from the neighborhood, who come just to his store (A Victor, personal communication, Oct 27, 2015). This regional following has helped Creep Records maintain its business in the often-empty Piazza, since it does not rely on walk-ins.

The very fact that Blatstein so quickly was able to garner higher rents shows the immense changes that were underway in Northern Liberties. The median home value in Northern Liberties has increased by almost 400% (from \$82,100 to \$325,400) since 2000, the year Blatstein purchased the Schmidt's property. The median income has also increased by about 250% over the same period (from \$32,782 to \$82,100). Not surprisingly, with all of the development in Northern Liberties, the population density increased from 6,458 to 9,835 people per square mile. An economic impact study commissioned by Tower Investments attributed the increase in density and wealth to Blatstein's investments. The study claims that Tower Investments' work in Northern Liberties has led to a \$1 billion dollar increase in the aggregate market value of real estate in Northern Liberties. In addition, "proximity to a Tower Investments development has conferred an

aggregate \$425 million increase in house values, and an additional \$13 million per year in property tax revenues to the City and School District of Philadelphia.” (Econsult Corporation, 2012). Tower Investments commissioned this report themselves, so its conclusions must be read critically; however, the statistics paint the picture of dramatic change in the neighborhood.

Today, the Piazza at Schmidt’s does not function at all like the Roman piazzas that Blatstein envisioned. In February of 2013, Tower Investments sold the controlling interest in the Piazza at Schmidt’s, then valued at around \$130 million, to Kushner Companies, a large New York real estate firm (Kostelni, 2013). Blatstein publicly stated that he was working to focus on his new casino project, while maintaining his other investments in the Northern Liberties neighborhood. For many Philadelphians, the sale represented a confirmation that Northern Liberties had “made it” and was a magnet for investment on a national level (Russ, 2013). However, for others, especially neighborhood locals, the sale marked a transition into something unknown and potentially unfavorable. Ed Landry, of neighboring Fishtown, has long been a visitor to the Piazza, especially in its early years. When Blatstein sold it, he remembers worrying about the transition to “the evil we don’t know.” (E. Landry, personal communication, Sept 20, 2015). He worried that an out-of-state company would not see the benefit in maintaining the Piazza as a vibrant public space. Many others, like Thompson, were and remain unsure about Blatstein’s motivation to sell the crown jewel of his

Northern Liberties investments. One retailer argued that since the sale, the Piazza's popularity has decreased (J. Smith, personal communication, Oct 17, 2015). However, Kushner alone cannot be held responsible for the breakdown of the Piazza's public space. Many of the reasons for the Piazza's faults come from deeper, systemic problems that have plagued the development from the beginning.

The demographics of Piazza residents have had a sizeable impact on the way the space is used. The interiors of Piazza residential buildings are often criticized as being "dorm-like," (Saffron, 2009) and not surprisingly, the residents that move into the space today are most often very young adults who stay only for a year or two. Leasing agents and residents alike confirm that many of the people living there are graduate students or medical students, who study at one of the nearby hospitals. Another group is comprised of young professionals, who are often recent graduates or newcomers to the city. Although exact data on residents cannot be released for confidentiality reasons, it is evident that the residents at the Piazza have considerable wealth for their age. Rent at the Piazza for a two-bedroom loft in the Navona building is currently \$1,700 per month. A Piazza leasing agent confirmed that this is around the average for the development, as most of the units have two bedrooms. In Philadelphia as a whole, the median gross rent is \$893 per month (accounting for all size apartments). At almost double the Philadelphia median, residential leasing at the Piazza is profitable, but alienates many long-standing Northern Liberties residents. In addition, the short-

term residents may be less likely to create, or participate in, a long-term vibrant community (E. Landry, personal communication, Sept 20, 2015).

Management of the residential amenities has also hindered the sense of community among residents. The large “cut-out” balconies throughout the development were originally intended to be communal residential spaces that would allow for people to socialize, and would add to the vibrancy of the square. However, almost immediately Tower Investments converted the communal balconies into private spaces accessible only to a few apartments, which pay rent premiums (M. Miller, personal communication, Oct 21, 2015). This change in strategy for the space represents the larger shift that took place at the Piazza after its opening: the prioritization of profit over the promised community.

Despite these drawbacks in the residential component of the development, the resident base is what seems to keep the Piazza profitable: at the end of 2015, the residential units of the Piazza were 97% leased and 96% occupied (Leasing agent, personal communication, Sept 20, 2015). However, even with high occupancy within the buildings, interviewed residents confirmed that they rarely stop to enjoy the square, or even pass through it. This makes it very difficult to translate the activity of the residents into the public realm.

Some interviewees argue that the dysfunction of the Piazza space is due to the way that Tower Investments chose to design the plaza space. Piazza project architect Mark Miller explained how the architects and the developer “had a

falling out for many, many different reasons,” near the end of the design process (M. Miller, personal communication, Oct 21, 2015). Creative disagreement with architects is somewhat of a ritual for Blatstein: according to Saffron, he has “broken with his architects on nearly every project.” (Saffron, 2009). Because of this, the architects continued their work on the buildings and left the central courtyard to the developers. The lack of professional design in the Piazza’s public space, though it may have saved Blatstein the cost of a paying a designer, has hindered the success of “the most important part of the project for ensuring vibrancy.” (M. Miller, personal communication, Oct 21, 2015). This resulted in a swath of empty paved space, punctuated by uninspired landscaping and just nine picnic tables for public seating [see Figure 2]

What Saffron originally called the “cafeteria-style tables that float aimlessly in the big plaza” are the still only real public seating options available (Saffron, 2009). Urban scholars have shown that seating is the most important feature of public space, and the Piazza is no exception. As Gehl (1987) wrote: “Only when opportunities for sitting exist can there be stays of any duration. If these opportunities are few or bad, people just walk on by.” The inflexible and inadequate seating at the Piazza causes many people who would consider sitting to go elsewhere. It creates many problems for those who do wish to stay in the space. The picnic tables and benches are very difficult to move (although some people do drag them occasionally), making it more challenging for users to be

fully comfortable. Groups of more than four people have no way of sitting together, as the seats around the picnic tables comfortably sit four adults only. One of the other problems with the picnic tables is the presence of massive umbrellas that shade them. Although this may seem like an unimportant feature, the umbrellas are opened by maintenance everyday when it is not raining – even if it is cold weather and people would want to sit in the warmth of the sun.

The Piazza also flaunts a 40' by 20' jumbotron that has a sizeable effect on the public space. It is fixed over a small stage in one end of the space, far from the small seating area, but still visible and audible. It plays sports or news channels for the entirety of every day. Turned off late at night and turned on early in the morning by the maintenance staff, the jumbotron acts not as an addition for special events, but as a constant presence in the Piazza. Its original purpose was to serve as a modern form of triangulation, which William Whyte (1980) defined as an external social stimulus that creates a social bond, causing strangers to talk to each other as if they were not. Miller explained that the jumbotron was part of the plans for the Piazza since the very beginning, before the architects at Erdy McHenry even became involved with the project. He acknowledged that it was meant to be a tool to draw people into the space, as they recognized from the start that the Piazza would need to actively attract people in if it was to be successful (M. Miller, personal interview, Oct 21, 2015).

However, in reality, the jumbotron rarely succeeds in bringing people together because of the awkward seating and general lack of people present. During most days, the Piazza remains relatively empty, with very few people watching the TV as it plays endlessly, commercials and all. Many new visitors find this phenomenon eerie, especially in the morning, or when the space is the least occupied (K. MacDonald, personal communication, Nov 14, 2015). However, users are divided on the merit of the jumbotron: many say they like having it there, including the restaurants and retailers, who say it adds interest to the space. One resident agreed with this, saying that she likes the jumbotron because “it makes the space feel less deserted. You know when you’re home alone and you have the TV on to make it feel better? This is the same idea.” (B. Densamo, personal communication, Oct 5, 2015). This is a powerful comment because it speaks to the nature of the space as a whole. Being out in the plaza essentially feels like being “home alone.” That is, in many ways, the antithesis of the Italian piazza: instead of a place bustling with activity and people enjoying the presence of others, it is a place where one feels particularly lonely.

Some users also have complaints about the Piazza’s landscape design. Thompson recalled a group of the early retailers asking for more grass and green in the Piazza, and their general dismay with the management response of installing a small patch of Astroturf. It has remained in place for the past six years. Miller, though mainly focused on his shining glass buildings, also

grumbled in dissatisfaction over the Astroturf grass and dry fountain that border the picnic table area. He remarked that, “of course, Erdy McHenry would not have done any of the landscape the way it is today.” (M. Miller, personal communication, Oct 21, 2015).

Because the courtyard is underused, it often leaves a barren, windswept and lonely impression. Observation proved the space is especially underused during weekdays, but it is easy to go there at any time and be the only person lingering, sitting or standing over the course of a few hours. The rest of the human activity consists of the passersby: occasional dog walkers, bikers or pedestrians that give the space a cursory glance while they wait for their dog or continue towards their destination. People who are new to the Piazza almost inevitably look up at the architecture and the massiveness of the space, often pausing to take a picture. But, realizing that there are few other people around, they conclude that this is not a place to stay. They continue walking through, slower than the residents and neighbors do, but still usually not willing to sit alone at the picnic tables without a real purpose.

Although the level of activity changes with time of day, weather and season – winter being the most “painfully” slow (A. Thompson, personal communication, Nov 5, 2015) - it is almost never at a level vibrant enough to reach the standard of the Italian piazzas. As Gehl (1987) described it: “Nothing

happens when nothing happens.” When the space is underused, it becomes unenjoyable to stay there, causing it to become only less and less attractive.

The inconsistency and lack of programming at the Piazza has also contributed to its barrenness. During 2015, except for a few private, ticketed parties held in the plaza, the space remained unprogrammed. This is because since 2014, Kushner Companies has halted virtually all events in the courtyard space. This was not true for all of Kushner’s time as owner: in the summer of 2013, they brought in the famous Brooklyn Flea Market from New York, which gained much publicity until it was discontinued at the end of the summer, to the dismay of many (Kauffman, 2013). This is a recurring theme at the Piazza: events come and go with very little long-term stability.

The history of programming at the Piazza is a long and constantly shifting evolution of occasional concerts, markets and shows – none of which have persisted since 2009. In 2010, there was the “Market at the Piazza,” which Thompson explained caused problems for the creative commercial tenants. In 2012, the Piazza advertised a weekly Sunday Bazaar, and the following year started to host free Radio 104.5 concerts, which brought in well-known artists and attracted huge crowds. Kushner Companies also hosted one of the largest concerts the Piazza has ever seen, the Forbes “30 Under 30” music festival, in October of 2014. It featured massive crowds, a smoke light show and reverberating bass, all captured in the Piazza’s promotional video, which still holds a prominent position

on their website. However, many point to this concert as the one that went too far, causing Kushner to put such events on hiatus. Speaking to residents and neighbors of the Piazza, many tell “horror” stories of smoke and noise disrupting residents, and of disorderly conduct throughout a neighborhood that is now relatively family-oriented (Vella, 2014). The commercial real estate agent for the Piazza confirmed that events were “out of control,” and that Kushner has privately made the decision to slow these down (Commercial leasing agent, personal communication, Oct 14, 2015)

Since this decision, public activities at the Piazza have been reduced to free outdoor yoga sessions and pick-up leagues of corn hole, both of which occur once or twice per week and attract about twenty people in good weather. Some of the only times when the Piazza is truly activated for the public are now during select Philadelphia sports games that are shown on the jumbotron on sunny weekend days. As people arrive, the picnic tables fill up very quickly, but the size of this crowd immediately showcases how ineffective the tables are. Most people bring their own folding chairs, while others sit on the ground or stand, though these people are the most likely to watch for just a few minutes then move on.

The end of events at the Piazza has also had very serious retail implications, as almost all of the current commercial tenants confirm. Currently, 10 of the 18 courtyard-facing Piazza retail spaces are not filled by retail. Two of these are used for leasing, management and a resident gym, while the rest are

simply vacant storefronts. In one corner commercial unit, floor to ceiling glass looks out into the piazza, the path into the Piazza and 2nd Street, effectively showcasing the lack of activity. A design that was meant to increase access and inspire a sense of community between the commercial tenants and the public now just reinforces the desolation of the plaza.

The two bars and two cafes that remain at the Piazza report a decrease in the number of customers with the scarcity of events and the disappearance of surrounding retail. The owner of Pink Dolphin, a Piazza convenience store since 2009, commented that the dearth of events at the Piazza in recent years has hurt their profit margin, because the store “used to get walk-ins from events every weekend,” (J. Smith, personal communication, Oct 17, 2015). One of the long-time staples of the Piazza was PYT, which is nationally renowned for its unique savory-sweet burgers. However, in early October 2015, PYT announced that it was leaving the Piazza for the adjacent neighborhood of Fishtown.

Though management recognizes the weaknesses of the Piazza in its current state, they have continued to market themselves as if nothing has changed since the development’s initial success. The website still states that the Piazza “hosts events all year round, such as concerts, free festivals, vendor markets, screening events, dance performances, live broadcasts of sporting events, ice skating and more.” An entire section of the website is devoted to the events calendar, with events sorted into ten different subcategories, the vast majority of

which are empty. The Piazza's marketing strategy shows that management is actively working to reinforce the original image of the Piazza as a successful community hub, even though the reality of the space perhaps never lived up to this acclaim.

Conclusion:

Although praised for its initial success, the Piazza at Schmidt's is currently an unsuccessful urban space because of its private-sector commitment to maximizing profit. Ultimately, Blatstein's drive for short-term results negated his interest in fostering a space integrated with the neighborhood. In this way, he knowingly sacrificed the artist community that Thompson had curated, but perhaps unknowingly, he sabotaged the future vitality of the public space. With more than half of its crucial interior retail vacant, almost no events, and very few people lingering to enjoy the plaza, the Piazza is entrenched in a negative cycle where the lack of people scares away retailers and new people.

Despite Blatstein's idiosyncrasies as a developer, the Piazza is indicative of a larger problem in American life. It exemplifies the types of spaces that the privatized, capitalistic market creates. The private sector is, by definition, seeking to maximize return on investment and this makes it difficult to produce dynamic public life, as creating a sense of community is often not the most profitable option. At the Piazza, Blatstein could not financially justify continuing discounted rents once he had better options. His goal was to make a profit while creating an

enjoyable urban space, rather than to create an enjoyable urban space while making a profit. This distinction is evident in the Piazza today. Perhaps if Blatstein had allowed the original artist community and event programming (which was less cost-effective, but more beneficial to the neighborhood) to continue for a few more years, it would have become profitable in its own right. However, the nature of private investment makes this very challenging.

Further research is needed to study the way that other privatized plazas function in the reality of daily life. By conducting post-occupancy evaluations on successful privatized open spaces, it may be possible to isolate factors that spur vibrancy in the profit-driven urban environment. With this type of specific knowledge, it will be easier to enforce regulations that ensure aspects of these “public” spaces favor the good of the neighborhood over the wealth of the developer. However, without a way to integrate long-term neighborhood vitality with financial success, private urban development will continue to produce places like the Piazza at Schmidt’s, which engender loneliness rather than life and vitality.

Figure 1:



Figure 2:



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